

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 NEAE-00 IO-13 SSM-03 SSO-00

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9380

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

USMISSION USUN

USIA WASHDC

DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 5843

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE

SUBJECT: SIGNIFICANCE OF AUGUST 31 SARKIS VISIT TO DAMASCUS

1. SUMMARY: SARKIS WAS WELL RECEIVED IN DAMASCUS WHERE HIS VISIT GAVE OPPORTUNITY FOR SARG TO REAFFIRM PUBLICLY SYRIA'S SUPPORT FOR LEBANESE TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY AND PALESTINIAN CAUSE. ANY SYRIAN INITIATIVE, WHETHER DIPLOMATIC OR MILITARY, BETWEEN NOW AND SEPTEMBER 23 WILL BE POPULARLY ASSUMED TO HAVE BEEN TAKEN WITH SARKIS' PRIOR KNOWLEDGE. THIS MAY HAVE THE EFFECT OF DIMINISHING LIKELIHOOD OF ANY IMMEDIATE LARGE SCALE SYRIAN MILITARY INITIATIVE IN LEBANON SUCH AS ATTACK ON WEST BEIRUT. SARKIS' SUPPORT FOR SYRIAN STRATEGY WILL BE ESSENTIAL BUT DAMASCUS
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MUST TAKE CARE NOT TO MAKE HIM APPEAR ITS PUPPET. END

SUMMARY.

2. SYRIAN MEDIA HAS GIVEN ELABORATE COVERAGE TO AUGUST 31 VISIT OF PRESIDENT-ELECT SARKIS TO DAMASCUS. OFFICIAL SYRIAN NEWS AGENCY REPORTED ASAD-SARKIS MEETING LASTED FIVE HOURS, DURING WHICH TWO LEADERS HELD "COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF LEBANESE CRISIS AND ITS RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND MEANS OF BRINGING LEBANON OUT FROM THIS CRISIS. EMPHASIS WAS PLACED ON IMPORTANCE OF SYRIAN EFFORT TO MAINTAIN PEACE IN LEBANON AND NEED TO PURSUE THIS EFFORT UNTIL FINAL SOLUTION REACHED PERMITTING RESTORATION OF NORMAL LIFE. PRES. ASAD STRESSED SYRIA'S CONCERN FOR ASSISTING LEBANON, FOR SAFEGUARDING ITS INDEPENDENCE AND UNITY, AND FOR SAFEGUARDING PALESTINE ISSUE AGAINST ANYTHING THAT WOULD (DISTRACT PALESTINIANS) FROM STRUGGLE TO MAINTAIN THEIR RIGHTS. DISCUSSION ALSO TOUCHED ON ARAB AND INTERNATIONAL SITUATION AND THEIR EFFECTS ON LEBANESE CRISIS. PRES-ELECT SARKIS EXPRESSED APPRECIATION FOR SYRIAN ROLE AND PRES. ASAD'S PERSONAL EFFORTS".

3. SARKIS ARRIVED IN DAMASCUS AT 1000L BY SYRIAN HELICOPTER, ACCOMPANIED BY LEBANESE DIRECTOR OF INTERNAL SECURITY HISHAM SHAAR, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC SECURITY ANTOINE DAHDAH AND DIRECTOR OF LEBANESE AFFAIRS OFFICE IN DAMASCUS SALAH ABBUSHI. SYRIAN COL. MUHAMMAD AL-KHULI ALSO TRAVELED WITH SARKIS. HE WAS MET AT AIRPORT BY PRIMIN KHULAYFAWI, FONMIN KHADDAM AND OTHER SARG OFFICIALS. HIS ARRIVAL STATEMENT STRUCK UP BEAT THEME THAT HE LOOKED FORWARD TO DAY WHEN LEBANESE AND OTHER ARABS, CHIEFLY SYRIAN, WOULD WORK TOGETHER TO REBUILD LEBANON. SARKIS RETURNED TO JOUNIEH IN LATE AFTERNOON.

4. TISHRIIN PUBLISHED ON ITS FRONT PAGE OPEN LETTER FROM NASSERITE LEADER KAMAL SHATILA TO SARKIS URGING HIM TO WORK TO HALT CONFESSIONAL FIGHTING, IMPLEMENT SYRO-PALESTINIAN ACCORD AND PRESERVE LEBANON'S UNITY AND ARABISM. LETTER ASSERTED THERE ARE NOW THREE DISTINCT TRENDS IN LEBANON: A) CONSERVATIVE TREND LINKED TO CONTINUATION OF CONFESSIONAL POLITICS, GUIDED BY WORLD IMPERIALISM, AIMING AT UNDERMINING NATIONALIST CONFIDENTIAL

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UNITY AND PALESTINIAN CAUSE, B) SO-CALLED LEFTIST TREND WHICH IN ACTUALITY ANTICIPATES INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CRISIS AND LEBANON'S PARTITION, AND C) NATIONALIST TREND WHOSE NUCLEUS IS NATIONALIST FORCES AND PARTIES WORKING TO HALT CONFESSIONAL FIGHTING.

5. COMMENT: VISIT UNDOUBTEDLY INTENDED TO REINFORCE VIEW, EXPRESSED IN TISHRIIN EDITORIAL, THAT "ROAD TO

PEACE PASSES THROUGH DAMASCUS". SARKIS WAS RECEIVED IN CORRECT PROTOCOL MANNER AS PRESIDENT-TO-BE. HIS VISIT PORTRAYED HIM AS FIGURE ABLE TO COOPERATE WITH SYRIA TO HEAL LEBANESE WOUNDS AND SERVED TO DIMINISH POSSIBILITY THAT CHRISTIANS MIGHT HAVE LAST-MINUTE CHANGE OF HEART AND DECIDE UPON INSERTING ANOTHER CANDIDATE INTO PRESIDENCY.

6. WE READ VISIT ALSO AS STEP TOWARDS SPREADING CLOAK OF LEGITIMACY TO PRESENCE OF THE GREAT BULK OF SYRIAN MILITARY FORCES NOW IN LEBANON WHICH ARE NOT OPERATING UNDER ARAB LEAGUE COVER. WE CONSIDER REITERATION IN SANA ABOUT NECESSITY TO SAFEGUARD INDEPENDENCE OF LEBANESE TERRITORY AS PARTICULARLY WELL TIMED AND AIMED AT DEFUSING SUSPICIONS OF THOSE WHO CLAIM SYRIA'S REAL AIMS INCLUDE ANNEXATION OF BEKAA AND TRIPOLI AREAS. (COINCIDENTALLY, SARKIS VISIT OCCURRED ON EVE OF SEPT. 1 ANNIVERSARY OF FRENCH PROCLAMATION IN 1920 DETACHING PROVINCES OF BAALBEK, BEKAA, RASHAYA, AND HASBAYA FROM SYRIA.)

7. SHATILA'S CONCEPTION OF RIGHTIST (READ CHAMOUNIST) AND LEFTIST (JUMBLATT) EXTREMES BRACKETING MODERATES (NATIONALISTS) PINPOINTS AUDIENCE TO WHICH DAMASCUS IS CURRENTLY TRYING TO APPEAL. WE BELIEVE SYRIA HOPES FOR FORMATION OF MODERATE COALITION UNDER SARKIS OF PHALANGE, TRADITIONAL MUSLIM LEADERS (KARAME, SALAM, YAFI, ETC.), NASSERITES AND OTHER "PROGRESSIVES," PALESTINIAN "MODERATES" AND ANY OTHER ELEMENTS THAT CAN BE WEANED AWAY FROM SWAY OF JUMBLATT.

8. SARG RESISTED TEMPTATION TO EMBRACE SARKIS TOO CLOSELY DURING VISIT LEST IT APPEAR HE LITTLE MORE THAN CONFIDENTIAL

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SYRIAN PUPPET. WE SPECULATE THAT SINCE SARKIS WILL BE THOROUGHLY IMPLICATED IN ANY SYRIAN ACTION UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO HIS ACCESSION TO POWER, HIS VISIT MAY DIMINISH CHANCE THAT DAMASCUS WILL LAUNCH DECISIVE MILITARY ATTACK SUCH AS AGAINST PALESTINIAN LEFTISTS IN WEST BEIRUT BEFORE SEPT. 23. APPLYING SAME LOGIC, WE LOOK FOR INTENSIFIED SYRIAN DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE ON ITS OPPONENTS IN LEBANON. MURPHY

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